

### **Berkeley on Assent and 'the Belief of Matter'**

This paper tackles the classical topic of assent and of the role of the will in the process of holding a proposition to be true. Berkeley's own contribution to the debate might seem quite meagre, since he deals only sporadically and obliquely with the question of whether assent is voluntary or not. However, I think that he has a couple of very interesting views on that topic, and that he cannot avoid having recourse to some account of what assenting consists in, for the simple reason that what he expects from his reader is that he or she assents to immaterialism or at least dissents from materialism. It seems to me that when Berkeley thinks about the kind of attitude toward immaterialism he expects his reader to have, he roughly draws on a Lockean account of assent, although he makes significant changes to it.

The most obvious difference between Locke's and Berkeley's ways of using the term 'assent' is that Berkeley, *pace* Locke, does not contrast assent or faith with science, or belief with knowledge. According to Locke, 'evidence' in the Cartesian sense triggers knowledge, not belief. On the contrary, Berkeley uses the term 'belief' in a sense that includes knowledge. Reasons for believing that qualities do not exist without a mind are conceptual. It is not a matter of testimony or of coherent analogy. What Berkeley terms 'reasonable grounds' for believing, an expression that has a strong Lockean flavour, do not consist only of grounds of probability. I quote out of context a passage from *Alciphron* VII (303): Euphranor says that 'Science and faith agree in this, that they both imply an assent of the mind', the nature of the first casting a light on the second. Although some commentators would want Locke to say

something like this, this is not the kind of claim we find in the *Essay*. I admit that this difference may be considered as mainly verbal: but the fact is that Locke sets 'belief' and 'assent' on the side of probability, not of knowledge proper.

However, it remains true that Berkeley makes use of Locke's account of assent since he speaks of our having motives or reasons or grounds for holding a proposition to be true in a few passages and notably in PHK 73, where he is also committed to the Lockean view that assent must be 'proportioned' to reasons for assenting.

I insist that Berkeley is interested in the debate on assent only to the extent that what is at stake is assent to immaterialism (what he calls 'the belief of immaterialism' in DHP III 257) or assent to materialism ('the belief of matter' – this expression is Berkeley's shorthand for the belief that there is a material substance – see PHK 75; DHP II 233, 257 & III 243). So Berkeley deals with assent at a metaphilosophical level. As far as I know, he uses the term 'assent' mainly when he tries to describe our various possible attitudes toward materialism and our difficulty to acquiesce to immaterialism, whether in the limited sense of the negation of the belief of matter, or in the full sense of the affirmation of spirits as the only kind of substances. I am not sure that he needs to have recourse to a psychology of assent to account for the ordinary operations of science and knowledge, but I am pretty certain that as far as our attitudes toward true or false religion, good or bad philosophy, are concerned, he is interested not only in the response of the mind, but also in the response of the heart.

Changing our system of beliefs supposes, first, that we become aware that our reasons for believing that a material substance exists are wrong (this is the negative part of the argument for immaterialism), and secondly, that we have good reasons for believing that a spiritual substance exists (this is the positive part of the argument for

immaterialism). But it is not sufficient that we believe the proposition. It is also necessary that we *acquiesce* to it – this is the response from the ‘heart’ –, for there are many cases of obstinacy, or prejudice, or of a mixture of the two, ‘obstinate prejudice’.

What is interesting here is that it may happen that people have the correct belief, but not in a full way. They have the correct belief because they understand the reasons for that belief, but they still resist the conclusion about the belief of matter. This is a case of what I call unphilosophical assent. I distinguish between three cases of unphilosophical assent: prejudice, obstinacy, which is different from prejudice, and obstinate prejudice, which is the most significant case, the true enemy – the struggle against obstinate prejudice requires much more effort than ordinary philosophical argument. So the second point in this paper will be about cases of unphilosophical assent. Of course we need to know more about the conditions of possibility of unphilosophical assent and for that I will focus in the end on the question whether assent is voluntary or not.

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## 1. Belief revision

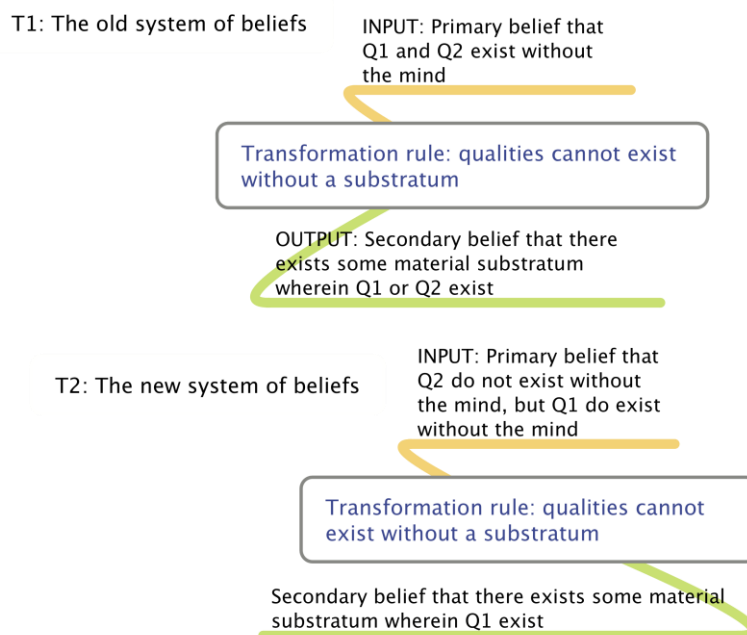
In PHK 73 we find an outline of what might be called a belief revision scheme – I use this expression in a non-technical sense. I am interested in Berkeley’s understanding of the way we revise or fail to revise our systems of beliefs.

It is worthwhile to reflect a little on the motives which induced men to suppose the existence of material substance; that so having observed the gradual ceasing, and expiration of those motives or reasons, we may proportionably withdraw the assent that was grounded on them.

First therefore, it was thought that colour, figure, motion, and the rest of the sensible qualities or accidents, did really exist without the mind; and for this reason, it seemed needful to suppose some unthinking substratum or substance wherein they did exist, since they could not be conceived to exist by themselves.

Afterwards, in process of time, men being convinced that colours, sounds, and the rest of the sensible secondary qualities had no existence without the mind, they stripped this substratum or material substance of those qualities, leaving only the primary ones, figure, motion, and such like, which they still conceived to exist without the mind, and consequently to stand in need of a material support.

So we have something that goes like this:



In PHK 73 Berkeley sketches what we may call a long run history of the 'belief of matter'. The history rests upon the interesting claims that

1. there are primary beliefs (inputs), that is, beliefs that either are taken for granted or are the conclusions of a previous argument, the conclusions being accepted as the premise of a new argument;

2. secondary beliefs (outputs) must be coherent with primary beliefs; the reason for having the secondary belief seems to be that we *need* to have consistent beliefs *and* not having the secondary belief would be inconsistent with the primary belief because of what I call the 'transformation rule'; the rule that every quality requires a subject is not proper to Berkeley, it is an uncontroversial principle (at least it is uncontroversial for the non-Humeans) which is common to ancient and modern philosophers;
3. a change in primary beliefs may occur, entailing a change in the whole system of our beliefs, the difference between outputs being entirely due to the differences between inputs; our systems of beliefs are individualised or characterised by the inputs;
4. there is a history of thought that consists in successive changes in the system of beliefs.

This belief revision scheme suggests that truth is not a matter of coherence alone, but of coherence plus correct premises.

Each system of beliefs has its corresponding age. The second age is that of mechanical philosophy (during which philosophers stress the reality of primary qualities). The first age is that of naive perceptual realism, maybe something like the Aristotelian view or rather what the Cartesians believe the Aristotelian view to be, that is, the projection of our feelings and sensations onto natural objects.

Of course the third age – let us call it the *new age* – is that of immaterialism. I quote the end of PHK 73:

But it having been shown, that none, even of these, can possibly exist otherwise than in a spirit or mind which perceives them, it follows that we have no longer any reason to suppose the being of matter. Nay, that it is utterly impossible there should be any such

thing, so long as that word is taken to denote an unthinking substratum of qualities or accidents, wherein they exist without the mind.

The input has changed and, fortunately, it is now correct. Then the picture is completely different:

T3: The system of beliefs we should adopt

INPUT: Primary belief that Q1 and Q2 do not exist without the mind

Transformation rule: qualities cannot exist without a substratum

Output: Secondary belief that there is no material substratum needed to account for the existence of Q1 or Q2

The transformation rule still applies, or, I should rather say, the requirement of a subject to support qualities is already satisfied, so that the secondary belief cannot be the belief of matter, but rather the belief of immaterialism in the negative sense. Notice that the idealist claim is input and that the immaterialist claim in the restricted sense (the denial of material substance) is output. Here the argument against the existence of material substance is not a premise to idealism, but a consequence. It is also interesting to note that the discussion on primary and secondary qualities is a preparation to the idealist input, and not directly an ingredient of the immaterialist conclusion. We might stop here. What we needed was the correct input – that required a previous work about the sound arguments for idealism – and since we have the correct input the rest should now follow.

We must pay attention to three aspects of belief revision according to PHK 73:

1. Differences between outputs are entirely due to differences between inputs.  
Therefore, in normal conditions of rationality, having the correct input should be sufficient for producing the correct output.
2. Inputs plus the application of the transformation rule constitute the 'reasons' or 'motives' or 'grounds' for assenting to secondary beliefs (outputs); in normal conditions of rationality, assent is 'proportioned' to them.
3. The reasons for assenting to primary beliefs (inputs) are not explicitly given.  
Are they deeply rooted habits, or wrong inferences from the phenomenology of perception in the case of T1? In any case, it is clear that the reasons are a wrong philosophical argument (mechanical philosophy) in the case of T2, and a correct philosophical argument (idealism) in the case of T3.

We might imagine that all we have to do now is simply work on the input, and that is indeed what even the contemporary Berkeleians do.. Berkeleians love to discuss reasons for assenting to primary beliefs, whereas Berkeley was interested in producing the assent to secondary beliefs. Section 73 of PHK draws our attention to the importance of the input beliefs in normal (in the sense of ideal) conditions of rationality, whereas it is obvious that the most serious difficulties appear in abnormal conditions of rationality even though the input is correct. The normal conditions are counterfactual due to the reality of unphilosophical assent and especially of obstinate prejudice. The difference between the first sections of PHK and the rest of the book, or *a fortiori* the difference between PHK and DHP, may be illuminated by the contrast between the process of belief revision in normal or ideal conditions of rationality, and the necessity of responding to obstinate prejudice.

## 2. Cases of unphilosophical assent

I will draw here on Blaise Pascal's distinction between *convaincre* and *persuader*. As is the case with many nice philosophical distinctions, this one tends to be blurred when translated into contemporary English. However I will try to convey something of it: Berkeley's main philosophical task is to provide the best arguments for the correct input, in order to (rationally) *convince*. However, this is not Berkeley's only task. He has to (subjectively) *persuade* in non-ideal, nay abnormal, conditions of rationality, since he must address unphilosophical assent and resistance to immaterialism.

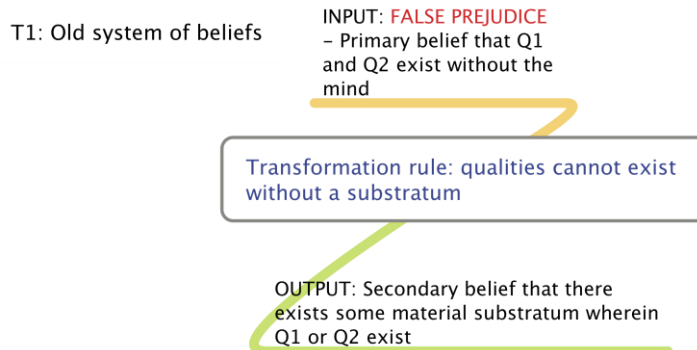
We might think that in order to account for *persuasion*, that is, the response to unphilosophical assent, we can rely on the same instruments as those of rational *conviction*. What we would need is just more attention to the proofs, a careful review of the reasons for believing (what Descartes in his *Discours de la méthode* calls a 'revue'). Indeed we also find in Berkeley an attempt to ascribe to the understanding, rather than to the will, the responsibility for some cases of unphilosophical assent, as is quite clear from the following passage:

PHILONOUS. But are you not sensible, Hylas, that two things must concur to take away all scruple, and work a plenary assent in the mind? Let a visible object be set in never so clear a light, yet if there is any imperfection in the sight, or if the eye is not directed towards it, it will not be distinctly seen. And though a demonstration be never so well grounded and fairly proposed, yet if there is withal a stain of prejudice, or a wrong bias on the understanding, can it be expected on a sudden to perceive clearly and adhere firmly to the truth? No, there is need of time and pains: the attention must be awakened and detained by a frequent repetition of the same thing placed oft in the same, oft in different lights. (DHP II 223)

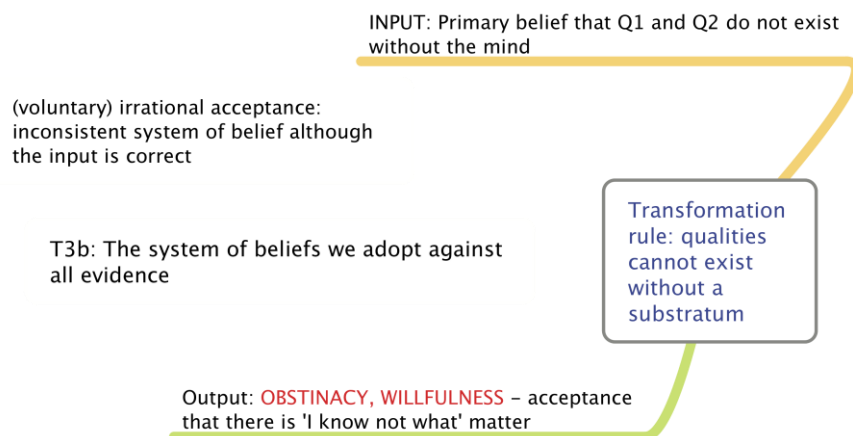
But this is not a very serious case, because the problem here is only that we do not have the right input. It is a case of sheer prejudice (false, and not obstinate). The first system of belief is a paradigm for that first kind of unphilosophical assent:



(involuntary) false belief: consistent system of beliefs, based on a wrong input



Things get significantly more serious and far more interesting when we do have the correct input, but the output does not follow, because there is a catch somewhere. This is the second case of unphilosophical assent, obstinacy:



The catch is due to obstinacy, which is very different from prejudice, at least on the surface. We have the correct input but we do not acquiesce to the output that follows. (Notice that it is impossible to account for this case of unphilosophical assent without

ascribing it to some extent to the will, since it is not a matter of whether we feel or think that P, but a matter of what we decide to do on the basis that P.)

So we have enough to understand the distinction between prejudice and obstinacy. Obstinacy is voluntary acceptance of what one knows to be wrong. A prejudice is an opinion, not necessarily false, not necessarily without reasons, but 'taken upon trust'. A good definition of prejudice may be found in Berkeley's *Discourse to Magistrates and Men in Authority* (205):

It may not be amiss to inculcate that the difference between prejudices and other opinions doth not consist in this, that the former are false, and the latter true; but in this, that the former are taken upon trust, and the latter acquired by reasoning... There may be, indeed, certain mere prejudices or opinions, which, having no reasons either assigned or assignable to support them, are nevertheless entertained by the mind, because they intruded betimes into it. Such may be supposed false, not because they were early learned, or learned without their reasons, but because there are in truth no reasons to be given for them.

William Hazlitt echoes this when he writes, in 'On Prejudice':

It is a mistake, however, to suppose that all prejudices are false, though it is not an easy matter to distinguish between true and false prejudice. Prejudice is properly an opinion or feeling, not for which there is no reason, but of which we cannot render a satisfactory account on the spot. It is not always possible to assign a 'reason for the faith that is in us,' not even if we take time and summon up all our strength; but it does not therefore follow that our faith is hollow and unfounded.

However, in spite of the apparently clear distinction between prejudice and obstinacy, we might say that as soon as the prejudice is reinforced by the acceptance of the prejudice, the distinction between prejudice and obstinacy gets blurred. Let us consider what for Berkeley is one of the best instances of prejudice available, the belief in transubstantiation:

... If the terms extension, parts, and the like, are taken in any sense conceivable, that is, for ideas; then to say a finite quantity or extension consists of parts infinite in number, is so manifest a contradiction, that every one at first sight acknowledges it to be so. And it is impossible it should ever gain the assent of any reasonable creature, who is not brought to it by gentle and slow degrees, as a converted Gentile to the belief of transubstantiation. Ancient and rooted prejudices do often pass into principles: and those propositions which once obtain the force and credit of a principle, are not only themselves, but likewise whatever is deducible from them, thought privileged from all examination. And there is no

absurdity so gross, which by this means the mind of man may not be prepared to swallow. (PHK 124)

Although it is logically impossible to assent on reasonable grounds to a proposition that is obviously self-contradictory, it is psychologically possible to assent to (now in the sense of 'to accept?') such a proposition on other grounds.

We recognise here the truly Lockean account of assent, not only because Berkeley speaks of a *proposition* as the object of assent, but also because he seems to have in mind assent in the restricted Lockean sense: the proposition is *verbal* and is *proposed* by someone else. This is the case of the Gentile to whom a claim about transubstantiation is proposed. One cannot have good reasons for assenting to it, since the claim is absurd. How absurd soever it is, one may nevertheless be 'brought to it by gentle and slow degrees'. Then it gains the 'force and credit of a principle'.

We could say that if the converted Gentile reflects a bit on his belief in transubstantiation, he will discover that it does not make sense, and if he nevertheless prefers to stick to that belief, then a case of prejudice becomes a case of obstinacy, much more interesting from the standpoint of the ethics of belief.

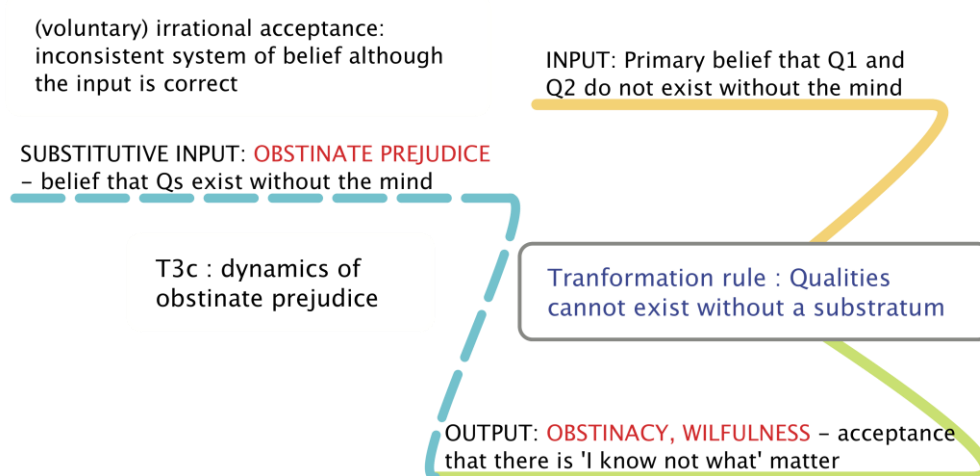
Now let us move on to the case of unphilosophical assent that really matters, that of obstinate prejudice. Although obstinacy and prejudice are very different things, Berkeley often speaks of 'obstinate prejudices'. One may be both obstinate and prejudiced, if one willingly declines good reasons for rejecting a prejudice, or if one willingly accepts what one knows to be a wrong prejudice.

HYLAS. To deal frankly with you, Philonous, your arguments seem in themselves unanswerable, but they have not so great an effect on me as to produce that entire conviction, that hearty acquiescence which attends demonstration. I find myself still relapsing into an obscure surmise of I know not what, matter. (DHP II 223)

Hylas understands the arguments but does not accept them. I think that the expression 'hearty acquiescence' is very significant, because it points to something different from the understanding, namely the will. Another instance is to be found in PHK 74:

But though it be allowed by the materialists themselves, that matter was thought of only for the sake of supporting accidents; and the reason entirely ceasing, one might expect the mind should naturally, and without any reluctance at all, quit the belief of what was solely grounded thereon. Yet the prejudice is riveted so deeply in our thoughts, that we can scarce tell how to part with it, and are therefore inclined, since the thing it self is indefensible, at least to retain the name; which we apply to I know not what abstracted and indefinite notions of being, or occasion, though without any show of reason, at least so far as I can see.

This is the way Berkeley construes Malebranche's philosophy as an obstinate defence of the prejudice of matter. Malebranche knows that the 'belief of matter' is wrong, but he maintains it in the guise of 'intelligible matter', occasions, etc. Thus, obstinate prejudice nullifies the impact of the correct input and blocks the way to the immaterialist system of beliefs. Here is a diagram of the (messy) dynamics of obstinate prejudice.



We *decide* not to pay attention to our primary belief. We adopt against all evidence a conclusion that risks producing a new prejudice, a new wrong input.

(Incidentally, in DHP Hylas can be regarded as at first prejudiced and, as the dialogue proceeds, becoming obstinately prejudiced. In a sense, this paper is about the way the *Dialogues* complement the argument of PHK.

### 3. The voluntary and the involuntary in Berkeley's account of assent

We are now in a better position to understand Berkeley's views about assent. Concerning the issue of how to distinguish what is voluntary from what is involuntary in the belief process, the major reference is Locke's *Essay*, II, xx, 16:

As knowledge is no more arbitrary than perception; so, I think, assent is no more in our power than knowledge. When the agreement of any two ideas appears to our minds, whether immediately or by the assistance of reason, I can no more refuse to perceive, no more avoid knowing it, than I can avoid seeing those objects which I turn my eyes to, and look on in daylight; and what upon full examination I find the most probable, I cannot deny my assent to. But, though we cannot hinder our knowledge, where the agreement is once perceived; nor our assent, where the probability manifestly appears upon due consideration of all the measures of it: yet we can hinder both knowledge and assent, by stopping our inquiry, and not employing our faculties in the search of any truth.

Here we have the perception model with two ingredients, attention and perception proper:

- Attention (turning our eyes to the object) is voluntary.
- Perception proper (seeing the object) is not voluntary.

Locke applies the perception model to belief. Assent is determined by the self-evidence of the proposition or by the reasons for believing:

- Attention to reasons for believing is voluntary.
- Assent is not voluntary.

The way Berkeley applies the model is somewhat more complex. I take as very significant that Berkeley speaks in several passages of a full assent (and on one occasion, as we have seen, of 'plenary' assent): in my view, 'full assent' means assent proper plus 'acquiescence', or acceptance in Jonathan Cohen's sense (or in a quite closely related sense ).

It is clear that assent based upon reasons is not voluntary, although the examination of reasons is voluntary. It is also clear that assent based upon evidence (in the Cartesian sense) is not voluntary either. Belief is 'extorted' by evidence; it happens that an opinion 'is so evident to our natural faculties, which were framed and given us by God, that it is impossible we should withhold our assent from it'. (DHP III 243)

However, when a proposition is not self-evident and is not supported by reasons and arguments and we nevertheless assent to it, what kind of assent is involved? Moreover, if we have good reasons for not believing that proposition, what kind of assent is then involved? Let us call this 'irrational assent'. The belief of matter is a typical case of 'irrational assent'. In a passage from DHP II Berkeley claims that irrational assent is *altogether* voluntary (this leaves some room for the view that assent may also be in other cases not altogether voluntary but voluntary to a certain extent). Here is the passage in which Philonous loses his patience:

[PHILONOUS] I have said it already, and find I must still repeat and inculcate, that it is an unaccountable licence you take in pretending to maintain you know not what, for you know not what reason, to you know not what purpose? Can this be paralleled in any art or science, any sect or profession of men? Or is there any thing so barefacedly groundless and unreasonable to be met with even in the lowest of common conversation?

But perhaps you will still say, matter may exist, though at the same time you neither know what is meant by matter, or by its existence. This indeed is surprising, and the more so because it is altogether voluntary, you not being led to it by any one reason; for I challenge you to show me that thing in Nature which needs matter to explain or account for it. (DHP II 224)

I think that what Berkeley has in mind here is irrational acceptance, not irrational beliefs. Irrational beliefs are not voluntary. They are caused by false prejudices (wrong primary beliefs, not known to be wrong). Irrational acceptance occurs when I take as a premise of my reasoning a proposition I know to be wrong.

In a very interesting passage of *Alciphron* IV, we find a conjunction between assent and acceptance:

CRITO. I think that as the proper end of our conference ought to be supposed the discovery and defence of truth, so truth may be justified, not only by persuading its adversaries, but, where that cannot be done, by showing them to be unreasonable. Arguments, therefore, which carry light have their effect, even against an opponent who shuts his eyes, because they show him to be obstinate and prejudiced. (143)

This text is important to my argument because it provides an instance of the contrary of 'full assent'. Here we have a full dissent. At least Crito can show that the interlocutor is obstinately prejudiced. The interlocutor is mistaken not only in his belief but also in his general intellectual behaviour. This is a moral fault.

We can now reconstruct the connection between obstinate prejudice and voluntary acceptance:

- Being prejudiced or not is not under the direct control of the will.
- Accepting or rejecting a prejudice, i.e. taking or not taking a prejudice as a premise, especially when it is known to be false, is under the direct control of the will.
- Accepting or refusing to take into account good reasons against the prejudice is also under the direct control of the will.

Does Berkeley answer the old question of whether assent is voluntary? He does. Assent proper is not voluntary. Acceptance is voluntary. Belief may be considered as voluntary to the extent that it rests upon the *examination* of reasons for believing (attention) and that it supposes acceptance. Belief is involuntary in so far as it is

motivated by reasons for believing or by evidence. Assent may be 'full'; so it may be partial as well.

In order to have a 'full' or 'plenary' assent to immaterialism, we must have both the belief that P, where P is idealism about primary qualities as well as secondary qualities, *and* the acceptance that P. If we have the belief of P and not the acceptance that P, or a fortiori the belief that P and the acceptance that not P, that is a case of obstinacy. And when the acceptance that not P leads back to the belief of matter as a new input, then it is a case of obstinate prejudice.

Acceptance is voluntary by nature and assent proper is involuntary by nature. Full assent is partly voluntary and partly involuntary because of its two different ingredients. Prejudice may be viewed as involuntary, but the acceptance of prejudice is voluntary, so that we are responsible for indulging ourselves in prejudices. Obstinate prejudice, that is, acceptance of prejudice accompanied by the knowledge that it is a false prejudice, is *altogether* voluntary, since accepting a proposition consists in deciding to take that proposition as a premise for reasoning or action. Believing a proposition is holding it to be true, or, more precisely, having a disposition to hold it to be true. Now we do not believe at will; as Jonathan Cohen puts it (22), 'we think of our beliefs as states of mind that are normally responsive to the truth, not to our own decisions'.

As Cohen argues, acceptance and belief usually go together, because reasons for believing that P usually coincide with reasons for accepting that P, and it often happens that reasons for accepting that P coincide with reasons for believing that P. But there is no conceptual link between acceptance and belief. On the contrary they appear to be logically independent. Accepting that P is never a reason for believing



that P, although reasons for accepting that P may be also reasons for believing that P. Believing that P is not a necessary nor a sufficient condition for accepting that P. So there is no necessary connection between the two. There is at best a causal connection, since acceptance tends to foster belief, and belief usually terminates in acceptance.

#### 4. Belief revision the other way around

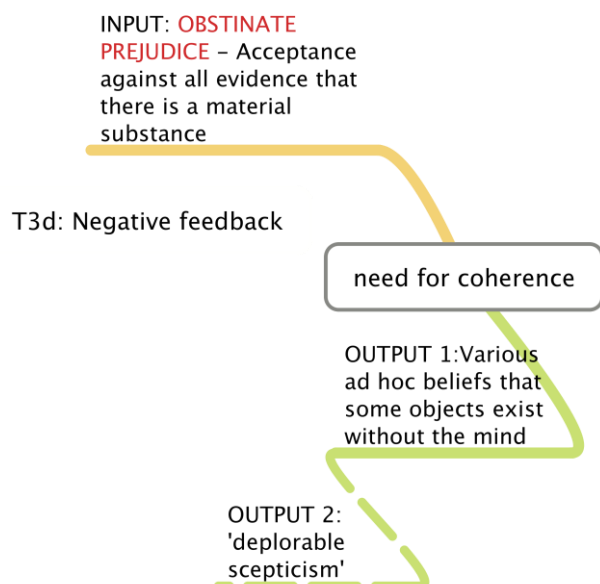
It is interesting to notice that belief revision may work the other way around, when immaterialism (in the sense of the negative claim that there is no material substance) or materialism (the claim that there is a material substance, independently of the question whether there is or not also a spiritual substance) is the input. As we have seen above, obstinate prejudice is characterised by a negative feedback. The wrong output, that there is a material substance, is reintroduced as the input. The new input plus the need for coherence lead us to the endless manufacture *ad hoc* beliefs. This is the way belief revision works when Hylas refuses to acquiesce to what he understands:

PHILONOUS. Pray tell me if the case stands not thus: at first, from a belief of material substance you would have it that the immediate objects existed without the mind; then that their archetypes; then causes; next instruments; then occasions: lastly, something in general, which being interpreted proves nothing. So matter comes to nothing. What think you, Hylas, is not this a fair summary of your whole proceeding? (DHP II 222-223)

PHILONOUS. You amaze me. Was ever any thing more wild and extravagant than the notions you now maintain: and is it not evident you are led into all these extravagancies by the belief of material substance? This makes you dream of those unknown natures in every thing. It is this occasions your distinguishing between the reality and sensible appearances of things. (DHP II 229)

PHILONOUS: 'Nor is this all: you are not only ignorant of the true nature of every thing, but you know not whether any thing really exists, or whether there are any true natures at all; forasmuch as you attribute to your material beings an absolute or external existence, wherein you suppose their reality consists. And as you are forced in the end to acknowledge such an existence means either a direct repugnancy, or nothing at all, it follows that you are obliged to pull down your own hypothesis of material substance, and positively to deny the real existence of any part of the universe. And so you are plunged into the deepest and most deplorable scepticism that ever man was. (DHP II 229)

The need for coherence is strong enough to induce the formation of absurd secondary beliefs from wrong primary beliefs in the following way:



But we also may have a positive feedback in the absence of obstinate prejudice.

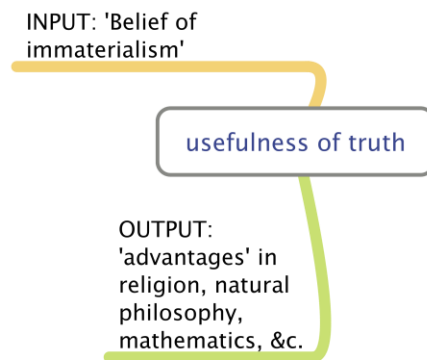
The immaterialism output may be reintroduced as the input. Since it is an essential property of truth, in Berkeley, that it is useful, immaterialism is accompanied with various advantages:

PHILONOUS. As a balance therefore to this weight of prejudice, let us throw into the scale the great advantages that arise from the belief of immaterialism, both in regard to religion and human learning. The being of a God, and incorruptibility of the soul, those great articles of religion, are they not proved with the clearest and most immediate evidence? [...] Then with relation to human sciences; [...] laying aside matter and corporeal causes, and admitting only the efficiency of an all-perfect mind, are not all the effects of Nature easy and intelligible? [...] Then in metaphysics; what difficulties concerning entity in abstract, substantial forms, hylarchic principles, plastic natures, substance and accident, principle of individuation, possibility of matter's thinking, origin of ideas [...] what difficulties, I say, and endless disquisitions concerning these and innumerable other the like points, do we escape by supposing only spirits and ideas? Even

the mathematics themselves, if we take away the absolute existence of extended things, become much more clear and easy [...]. (DHP III 257-258)

The positive feedback looks like this:

T3e: Positive feedback



## Conclusion

I have not here opted for a Cartesian construal of Berkeley on these matters. It might be objected that it is plausible that Berkeley, in his account of assent as well as in his general views about the powers of the mind, draws on the Cartesian construal of the distinction between the will and the understanding. According to Descartes, it depends on the will whether we assent or not to what is proposed to us by the understanding. But as I have pointed out, there is some textual evidence, mainly the vocabulary of motives and grounds of assent, in favour of the claim that the background of Berkeley's understanding of assent is to be found in Locke rather than in Descartes. Moreover, it is further the case that Berkeley follows Locke in comparing assent with visual perception. Assenting to a proposition is analogous to just seeing. You may decide to open or to close your eyes, but once your eyes are open you cannot prevent yourself from seeing. The analogy between assent and perception leads to the conclusion that assent proper is not voluntary. In Descartes, there is at best a causal dependence of

assent on perception, but assent is not a perception of the understanding, it is only a determination of the will.

So we have good reasons to consider that Berkeley draws on Lockean views about assent. But the picture is more complex. There are several passages in Berkeley in which it is clear that there is something voluntary that is involved in the belief process. For instance in DHP III 259, Philonous apostrophizes Hylas thus: 'Pray, Hylas, do you in other cases, when a point is once evidently proved, withhold your assent on account of objections or difficulties it may be liable to?' Philonous means that Hylas is doing just this, namely, withholding his assent against all evidence. Here it is clear that assent is voluntary. I quote again out of context a famous passage from *Alciphron* VII, in which Euphranor speaks of a 'practical faith, or assent, which shows itself in the will and actions of a man, although his understanding may not be furnished with those abstract, precise, distinct ideas' (*Alciphron* VII 302). Many people have commented on this passage, and I think (although I may be mistaken) that in general they have focused on the question of the semantics of practical faith – the sexy question about the way in which terms that do not stand for ideas do nevertheless have a meaning –, but they have paid little attention to the fact that practical faith shows itself 'in the will and actions'. In the same dialogue, it is said that the belief 'that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, are God, and that there is but one God' may become for the Christian 'a lively operative principle, influencing his life and actions' (*Alciphron* VII 297). Being saved or not does not depend on the will of human beings (it depends on the will of God), but it depends on them whether or not they have a 'saving faith' and it depends precisely on their will whether they fully acquiesce to what they believe, that is, whether or not what they believe has an impact in their life. In my view a full assent

combines the passive recognition of truth (assent proper) and the active acceptance of what then becomes an 'operative principle', that is, a rule for life, action, reasoning, discourse.

My main point in this paper has been that we have some ground for distinguishing two ingredients in what Berkeley terms 'plenary assent' or 'full assent'. In order to dispel the seeming contradiction between passages in which assent is voluntary and passages in which it is involuntary, we need a distinction between assent proper and acceptance or acquiescence. We need the distinction, and we also need support for the claim that Berkeley actually makes that distinction. Evidence, although scarce, suggests that Berkeley did have in mind something precisely of this sort.